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Technology Update: The Coming of the All-Electronic Library

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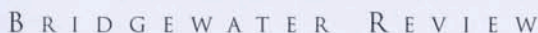
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*The Coming of the
All-Electronic Library*
BY WILLIAM C. LEVIN

Now, things have changed so much that twenty-seven years later I was able to essentially reproduce my earlier literature search in less than an afternoon. I never had to leave the desk in my office and, in fact, I was able to find many more citations than I had originally. For anyone who has conducted a literature search using computerized sources, there is no magic in this. There is a wide range of library collections available at Bridgewater, and many more from the great research universities in the world through a variety of computer connections. For those who have not had reason to do such a literature search, I can easily illustrate the process. I took a few moments from writing this article to connect to Maxwell Library's electronic databases and conducted a search using something called "Academic Search Elite" which describes itself as "An index, with abstracts, to 3000+ publications, many of which are in the social sciences. Over 1000 of

Sarah Nesbitt's job is roughly divided in halves between her responsibilities to users of the library, and to the operation of the library's automated systems. Let's begin with the user-oriented part of her job. When a student, faculty member or staff member needs to find some library resource he or she may go to a reference librarian for help. The range of questions is as broad as the range of forms in which our information is available today. For example, a library patron typically wants information on a particular topic, and the information may be found in any of a variety of forms, including books, journals, films, videos, government documents, audio tapes, databases, web sites or other



electronic publications. Before electronic search technologies existed, a good reference librarian could answer patron questions with a knowledge of the holdings of their own library, or by use of guides to the holdings of other libraries with which they formed consortiums (usually regional) for the sharing of materials. This is still very much true - it's just that the ways of searching these other libraries' databases is easier now. Before, too, librarians, particularly in academic libraries, spent a lot of time showing patrons how to do searches, but the catalog medium was different then. But now a reference librarian spends a good deal of time showing patrons how to search the materials in their own library, and the seemingly infinite number of other libraries and information resources for answers to their research questions. Many of the sources of information are not in physical library buildings, but in virtual libraries or library collections that maintain information in electronic form alone. Sarah's knowledge of the techniques for finding these sources must keep up with both the newly available materials that are coming on line every day, but also with those that were in traditional printed form, but are now being republished in electronic form. Classic texts (both fiction and non-fiction) and old journals are daily translated into electronic form and made available to on-line searches. I learned my academic search skills thirty years ago and used them happily until a few years ago. I had no reason to complain about days spent in the stacks until I asked a reference librarian (not Sarah, actually, but Cynthia Svoboda, who also does this work in Maxwell Library) for help in finding some arcane bit of information. Expecting to be directed to an on-line version of my old search indexes, I was surprised to see Cynthia conduct the equivalent of a week's worth of search in a few minutes work at a library computer terminal. Sarah and the other reference librarians spend a great deal of time helping patrons conduct such searches for their specific needs.

Needless to say, no college library can afford to hire enough reference librarians to answer all the reference questions that students and teachers can ask of them. So another large part of Sarah's job is to teach patrons how to do such searches themselves. For students learning these skills is a required part of their curriculum and a natural extension of the computer world in which they were raised. But for older teachers like me, learning computer skills is neither easy nor natural. Part of Sarah's job is to help people like me to gain the search skills so we don't have to ask for reference help for each of our unique searches for classes and for research. Eventually, we should actually be able to teach these skills in our own classes. As part of this process publishes printed and electronic guides to inform library users of new resources as they become available. She and the other reference librarians also assist faculty with class-related assignments by teaching library instruction sessions for students.

The other half of Sarah's time is devoted to the informa-

tion system itself. The physical computers, the software that runs them, and the information services and databases to which the library subscribes must be installed and maintained. New products must be evaluated and integrated into the system, and the system must also be evaluated in terms of its efficacy for users. These are primary responsibilities that Sarah Nesbeitt deals with daily. None of them existed even twenty years ago. She designed the Library's web site and maintains it, working from decisions made by a web committee she chaired. Anyone who calls up the college web site can get into the library web site and, depending on their location (on-campus or off campus) use a range of the library resources and search capabilities. For example, Webster, the electronic catalog of the holdings of the Maxwell Library, went online in June of 1999. Sarah later designed the interface and many of the graphics that made it a Bridgewater site. The paper card catalog is ancient history already. Also on the library web page are links for other library resources and services. These include:

- 1) *Electronic resources including databases and search guides, Internet resources by subject, a database of the full-text journal titles owned by the library, and online indexes and abstracts*
- 2) *Library Services including library hours, descriptions of library service units, floor plans, circulation and reserves, and off-campus access information*
- 3) *Library Collections including guides to library resources, a periodical list, and the library's list of recent acquisitions*
- 4) *Electronic Forms, which allow members of the Bridgewater community to suggest books for purchase, place interlibrary loan requests, request a library instruction session, and place books on reserve.*

Lastly, Sarah's work in electronic library resources has, naturally, spilled over into her research interests. She is, for example, the regional editor (North America) for *Reference Reviews*, a journal that reviews reference materials, including electronic reference resources. When new reference resources are marketed, such as an online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, Sarah has a list of about fifty reviewers available to evaluate them. Reference librarians can then read these reviews for help in deciding whether to acquire them for their libraries. In addition, Sarah designed and runs a web site that posts library jobs on the Internet, and is co-authoring a book to be titled *The Information Professional's Guide to Career Development Online*. It will focus on the ways in which people in jobs like a librarian's can use online resources to develop professionally.